PELE OF MUSIC

Salil Chowdhury was the nearest thing to a genius on the music beat

WORKING in creative collaboration with Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber is a challenge that A R Rahman is poised to meet, creativity-wise. Before A R Rahman, Illayaraja hit international headlines, as his symphony met with the sanction of the west. If Rahman worked as a computer programmer with Illayaraja, Salil Chowdhury had Illayaraja, at one time, playing the guitar in his orchestra. "He

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is a very, very good guitarist," Salil told me. And Salil Chowdhury, with his inventive fusion of the east and the west, is the nearest thing to a genius I have encountered on the music beat. How many of you know that Salil's entire background score for Raj Kapoor's *Jagte Raho* is in symphony? "But why did you never take your symphony to the west for judgment or assessment?" I asked Salil.

"Who are they to judge us?" came back Salil. With becoming Bengali modesty, Salil identified himself as the Pele of Music. "Take the game of football," said Salil, "all the rules are there – free-kick, throw-in, offside, penalty, yet there is a player like Pele who produces something outside the rules, even while being within them. I am that Pele in music!"

The talk turned to Lata Mangeshkar's *'Saathi re tujh bina jiya udaas re'*, as scored by Salil for *Poonam Ki Raat*. Get a feel of how, here, the whole Salil arrangement is yet again in symphony – an instance of 'harmonic progression'. "What a rendering by Lata, what orchestration, what use of chords – even if I am saying so!" observed Salil, descending with a sense of fulfilment on the piano, as I caught up with him in his Calcutta home.

I had dared Salil to move – to demonstrate to me that Lata-Talat Mahmood's 'Itna na mujh se tu pyaar badha' (from Chhaya) was not a lift of Mozart. Salil did not, for a moment, deny that 'Itna na' is Mozart's G Minor Symphony. But then proceeded to detail how precisely he had got Lata to transform the *'Itna na mujh se'* beat. "Does it not now sound exactly like Bhairavi?" Salil sought to now. "But isn't it still copying?" I sked. "If it is copying," came back Salil, "it is creative copying! Even Shakespeare plagiarised!" Salil added," by way of a parting Pele kick.

I carried to Salil, Pandit Ravi Shankar's point of view that he tended to make the orchestra needlessly complicated – that there was no call for him to have introduced a western melody in the *Parakh* solo, *'O sajana barkha bahaar aayee'* (a solo Lata named first among her 10 best ever songs, handpicked during her silver jubilee in 1967). Salil was dismissive of Ravi Shankar's viewpoint – almost in a spirit of: "There is nothing he can teach me about staying Indian or going western!" Whereupon I chipped in, "You must have got someone really big, Salil-*da*, to play the sitar, a sitar competing with Lata's vocals, in *'O sajana barkha bahaar aayee'*."

Salil Chowdhury and his favourite singer Lata Mangeshkar

"I don't agree that the sitar vies with Lata's voice for attention in *'O sajana'*. Lata's voice here is something out of this world, the sitar piece, created by me, merely underscores its beauty. Jairam Acharya, the sitarist, had a tremendous 'sense of the microphone', he was a master in the selection of the right string. Plus he understood the art of 'placing' the microphone better than most."

I took this as the opening to ask, "Salil-*da*, who accompanies Lata on the flute in *'Aa jaa re pardesi'*, picturised on Vyjayanthimala so hauntingly playing Madhumati?" And Salil's reply, "It's Manohari Singh on the flute. I don't, you must comprehend, need famous names for my instrumentation. I need, primarily, a player who will strictly conform to my chords' system of recording discipline.

"I have in *'Aa jaa re pardesi'*," Salil added, "used the 7th chord as basic melody, the chord of incompletion – symptomatic of 'desire unfulfilled' on Vyjayanthimala, playing the apparition in *Madhumati*. The *antara* here was Lata's own suggestion, *"Pancham se shuru karte hain,"* she said. Lata never ever interfered in the case of my composition, this was the first – and last – time she had made a suggestion. And a great suggestion it turned out to be, too, it made all the difference. There was a spell when I lost contact with Salil, when, out of the blue, he wrote to me in April 1972: "My dear Raju, I am sending herewith a set of *Annadata* records for your valuable opinion. You will find in them the style and approach which are typically my own. I will very much value your sincere opinion about these compositions, especially Lata's *'Nis din nis din mera zulmi sajan'* and *'Raaton ke saaye ghane'*, which is a breakaway from the usual norm of film music."

Yet, when Salil finally returned to Bombay (early in 1994) to score for *Swami Vivekananda*, he was distressed to find the same Lata unresponsive to the idea of recording a thematic solo for him in the G V Iyer epic.

Lata, I here felt, acted shrewdly indeed. She discerned that, in the state in which her voice was by then, there was no way she was going to be able to measure up to the intricate demands sure to be made by Salil. This composer's composer finally turned to Kavita Krishnamurthy for the song: *'Prabhu mero avagun chit na dharo'* (written by Vivekananda himself).

Kavita was gratified to sing for a titan like Salil, on the all-India screen, for the first time in her career. And Kavita gave that Salil swan song everything she had, making the recording (at Sahara in Mumbai) a unforgettable experience for me. It was the last I heard of Salil...